
In demand for more than a decade, studies on the historicity of the human body have become a thriving field in cultural history. A provocative introduction was: Michael Feher, Ramona Naddaff, Nadia Tazi (eds.) (1989): Fragments for a history of the human body. New York, NY: Zone, 3 volumes. In the history of science, work expanded, during the same time period, beyond the analysis of texts and theories into an investigation of scientific practices, social networks, or material cultures. The collection of eight essays, edited by Christopher Lawrence and Steven Shapin, weaves these two strands of work together in a timely book on the scientist’s body, spanning the period from antiquity to Victorian Britain, which will surely mark a point of reference. The editors, their authors, and the publisher have taken great care preparing the volume: a pre-circulation of the papers among the authors, for example, resulted in a dense cross-referencing among the contributions which are all very well written; an introduction by both editors and an opening essay by Shapin increase the consistency and coherence of the volume even further; the detailed index allows easy access to every possible topic; carefully chosen illustrations provide further evidence to arguments about representations of scientists; and the literature is referenced in a coherent and handy way. The book has been reviewed widely and first reprints of chapters have been appearing elsewhere (Janet Browne’s paper on Darwin is, for example, reprinted in Londa Schiebinger (ed.) (2000): Feminism & the body. Oxford: University Press, pp. 317-354).

Nonetheless, if the volume irritated and dissatisfied the reviewer, it is not because of any doubts about the high quality of the essays, but because the book as a whole left as much to be desired as it raised. The problem is the book’s slight derailment; it misses appropriately addressing its topic, the historical embodiment of knowledge, at least from the point of view of historical epistemology. The editors’ effort resulted – if I may stress this point by overemphasis – in essays about representations of the knowing body in historical perspective, about scientific personae. This is certainly an important and intriguing topic which deserves more such careful scrutiny. The scientific personae of the natural philosopher or scientist did not only form the public conception of the sciences’ «heroes», but contributed to the sciences’ historical trajectory by shaping the social space of science. However, the complex dynamics between human body and human knowledge, and their historical trajectory, is barely touched upon in
this collection despite its promising title. Although the editors do refer to, for example, Michael Polanyi and his concept of the tacit dimension of knowledge, neither they, nor most of their authors, discuss the constructive role of the human body in the production of knowledge. With the two notable exemptions of Alison Winter’s and Andrew Warwick’s papers, the book gathered its very coherence out of a focus on the social history of body concepts. The book thus excludes, against its title, a detailed discussion on the embodiment of knowledge, and on the epistemological dimension of embodiment. The only essay in this collection informed by gender studies, Winter’s «Calculus of suffering», does not by chance progress farthest into an actual questioning of possibilities and constraints of the embodiment of knowledge, as gender studies of science once started by questioning disembodied knowledge.

Peter Dear’s essay on Descartes’ conceptualization of mind-body-passion relationships might explain how this book fails to fully accommodate the expectations stipulated by its title. Dear, who certainly contributed one of the best papers to the volume, combines a social history of Descartes’ times, his life in the Netherlands and the period’s fascination with automata, with a close reading of Descartes’ conceptualization of an intricate intertwining of the passions and the body, resulting in machine-like, but adjustable and therefore rational, behavior. As Descartes derived his idea of an automaton-like body mechanism from the drill he learned while in the army, Dutch society welcomed the Cartesian worldview on basis of its adaptability to new social experiments. By situating Cartesian philosophy in its socio-historical context, Dear thus demonstrates conclusively the historical plausibility of a concept nowadays often denounced as the beginning of an unjustified and unjustifiable mind-body dualism.

As far as Dear pursues his argument, it stays firmly within a social history of ideas. Although he begins his essay by citing Le Clerc’s diagrams which demonstrate abstract geometry as sword-play, Dear discusses intellectual resources instead of bodily practices and their possible action on the mind. He comes short of developing a social history of Cartesian epistemology out of such body regimes as the new forms of automaton-like behavior of soldiers. In his analysis, there is no embodiment of knowledge outside of social networks, and, mysteriously, inside of Descartes’ writing on embodiment. What were Descartes corporeal practices? Almost a generation ago, Rudolf zur Lippe analyzed such regimes under the programmatic title of «domesticating nature via the human body». More recently, Otto Sibum has analyzed the hidden epistemological implications of practical knowledge and Hélène Mialet has studied Stephen Hawking’s distributed corporeality (zur Lippe (1974): Naturbeherrschung am Menschen. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, Hélène Mialet (1999): Do angels have bodies? Two stories about subjectivity in science: the cases of William X and Mister H, in: Social Studies of Science 29(4): 551-581. Otto Sibum (1998): Les gestes de la mesure: Joules, les pratiques de la brasserie et la science, in: Annales Histoire, Sciences Sociales 53: 745-774). These are steps towards an historical epistemology of incarnated science.